

Each month we make our reviews as detailed as possible, but we know your purchasing decisions are determined by your own specific needs. In the first of a new regular feature, Spencer Dalziel exercises the personal touch and helps a *PC Advisor* reader choose a new monochrome printer for his office



Reader's choice: monochrome laser printers

A monochrome laser printer is a vital piece of hardware for small workgroups and home offices. For fast, cheap text printing it can't be beaten. Inkjets are ideal where small volumes of colour output are needed and, for bigger jobs, a colour laser printer is a better, albeit costlier, option. Where the majority of printing in an office is black text, however, a mono laser printer is the most efficient and cost-effective choice.

Not surprisingly, many readers are keen to know more about these essential devices. Alan Murphy contacted us because he needed a new printer for his London-based business, Clarendon Promotions. The business encompasses direct marketing, printing and distribution and employs about 14 staff. They print around 1,000-2,000 pages per month and need a model that can handle this workload and produce high-quality results, even for images and graphics. As Alan

explains, "Though I don't have to present our prints to clients, the nature of our business demands quality good enough to see the designs we produce."

Because of the relatively low volume of printing, speed isn't important but

such trays, as they feel they could be broken in a busy office. However Alan wasn't put off: "It feels sturdy enough to cope with our office," he said. He also liked the easy access to the components, making paper jams simple to sort out.

Alan Murphy contacted us because he needed a new printer for his London-based business. "Reliability, functionality, ease of use and total cost of ownership are ultimately crucial," he explains

"reliability, functionality, ease of use and total cost of ownership are ultimately crucial", he explains. "Space isn't a problem in the office, so size won't matter and the office PCs are standalone rather than in a LAN (local area network)," so the printer need not be networkable.

We tested a range of printers for Alan and ran through the pros and cons of each with him. The printers were: Epson's EPL-5900; HP's LaserJet 1220; Lexmark's E322N; and Brother's HL-1450. We were sure that one of these would meet Alan's needs. Read on to find out which one he chose and why.

First impressions

Before looking at the finer detail of what each printer had to offer, we asked Alan to give his initial thoughts.

First up was the Epson EPL-5900. It's fairly tall compared to some of the other units, with a 250-sheet paper tray extending from the front. Some users are wary of

Next on our list was the HP LaserJet 1220, which has even more protruding parts including the extra scanner and copier. Alan was a bit dubious about this, and the fact that this printer took longer than the others to set up. "If it takes an hour to set up and there are several employees waiting to use the hardware, we could lose a day's work," he explained. However, the toner mechanism impressed him, as it presents itself to be changed as soon as you flip down the front panel.

Lexmark's and Brother's printers have a more boxy design, with no external parts. The Brother HL-1450's paper tray is beneath the unit, while the Lexmark E322N has a u-bend paper feed. We find that these tend to be prone to jams, which Alan was keen to avoid. That said, he liked the clear instructions – using words rather than icons – employed by the Lexmark: "I like the writing because it tells you what the problem is and I don't have to refer to the manual to see why the light's blinking."

Spec for spec: the contenders measure up

Brother HL-1450

Pros: low running costs; easy to use; good 600dpi print quality

Cons: inconsistent print quality; slow

Brother: 0161 931 2354

Website: www.brother.co.uk

Price: £269 ex VAT

Epson EPL-5900

Pros: good print quality; low running costs; easy internal access

Cons: some banding on printouts

Epson: 0800 220 546

Website: www.epson.co.uk

Price: £269 ex VAT

HP LaserJet 1220

Pros: good print quality; extra functionality; high print speed
Cons: expensive to run; requires frequent toner changes

HP: 0870 547 4747

Website: www.hp.com

Price: £385 ex VAT

Lexmark E322N

Pros: low-cost network printing
Cons: expensive to run; maximum resolution only 600dpi

Lexmark: 0870 444 0044

Website: www.lexmark.co.uk

Price: £459 ex VAT



OUR CHOICE



READER'S CHOICE



PC Advisor's recommendations are for guidance only and are not a guarantee of suitability. The publisher takes no responsibility for purchasers' decisions.

What the experts say

The Lexmark E322N may be one of the cheapest networkable printers around, but Alan found it too noisy. Furthermore, print quality is only average and running costs are high – a toner cartridge with a claimed life of 6,000 pages costs £97. That's a lot to pay out every three months.

With its low running costs and purchase price, the Brother HL-1450 seemed a better option. Its top resolution of 1,200x600dpi (dots per inch) betters the Lexmark's, but images at this setting were dark and blurry. In fact printouts were only acceptable at 600dpi, which ultimately put Alan off: "I work in printing, so it's important to get excellent high-resolution quality from our printer."

With those printers ruled out, we turned to HP's LaserJet 1220. Though pricey, Alan liked its bonus scanning and copying facilities. Printing is fast, and quality is consistent across all resolutions. But it is expensive to run: toner cartridges are £57.55 and last 3,500 pages.

The printer we thought would suit Alan best, was the Epson EPL-5900. We found

→ Alan checks out the Lexmark's flip-down front. He particularly liked this printer's clear user instructions

➤ Just how accessible is the Brother's toner cartridge? Easy replacement of consumables is important to keep Alan's busy office running

it hard to fault on quality, value, speed and specifications. It offers consistently high print quality, and pages are 0.5p cheaper to print than with the HP.

The reader's choice

But Alan wasn't tempted by the Lexmark or the Brother: "The Lexmark is too costly and I don't need the network option. Brother's HL-1450 is the cheapest to run and had some good results but it was inconsistent," he explains.

Alan did like our choice, the Epson EPL-5900, but it was pipped to the post by the HP LaserJet 1220, as he was impressed by what he was getting for his money, despite the high purchase and running costs. "I'm paying an extra £150 for the hardware and will be getting the bonus functionality of a scanner and a copier." ■

How to contact us

If you are thinking of buying some new hardware and would like our help, email details of your requirements and budget to us at reviews@idg.com or write to Spencer Dalziel at *PC Advisor*, Fifth Floor, 85 Tottenham Court Road, London W1T 4TQ.



What did Alan want?

- A standalone mono laser printer
- Quality printing for graphics and images
- Functionality
- Reliability
- Ease of use
- Familiar brand name
- Speed not important
- Economical total cost of ownership
- Budget approx £400 ex VAT